

August 2009. Ups and Downs, Bye-Byes.

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Late summer ups and downs - ups: the successful fledging of a Roller chick on my land, the finding of a Red-footed Falcon and butterflies including Silver-spotted Skipper, and Bath White, both new butterflies to add to my burgeoning list of species, plus nice views of Bee-eaters at a recently discovered colony; downs: the end of an era with the loss of one of the adult Rollers, the falling of one of the grandest trees on my land, plus the first hints of autumn with departing White Storks. Assorted other news: Black Kites, Golden Orioles galore, the start of the Nutcracker movement, no quiet in this neck of the woods.

1 August. The End of an Era. Near five years to the date since we met, the sad demise of my male Roller has cast a shadow across my land. The history of this bird, of my land, and indeed of me over the last five years, are inextricably linked - late summer 2004, I was pondering land acquisition, a hazy idea of creating a reserve to protect my little bit of the globe. Doing the rounds, visiting site after site, I happened upon a very nice plot of mixed meadow, flood forest and bushland. Before I had chance to um and arrh, over he flew, an omen indeed so I thought, I bought the land. A bird nearing extinction in the country, surely a worthy reason to start my reserve project. And as the years rolled by, Old Faithful returned year after year, attracting a mate and raising young, one of only perhaps 25 to 30 pairs in the country. Each winter I feared he may not return, that the wintering grounds would not be kind or the rigours of migration knock him down, every spring I delighted in his return. Old Faithful, 2004-2009 So too did I this year, the male and partner arriving late, but there on 30 May, the two birds sat, re-establishing territory and choosing a nest site last favoured in 2006, a good kilometre from the locality in 2007 and 2008. Within days, nesting was underway, another season to share with Rollers guaranteed. All went well - the young hatched in the days somewhere prior to 11 July, all pretty much on a par with past years. Barely one week later, however, I noticed an absence, only the female was hunting and carrying food back to the nest. I paid little heed, probably I'd just overlooked him I supposed, often the birds would feed up to a kilometre or even two from the nest. Didn't see him the following week either, alarm bells began to ring, tempered only by the fact that the female remained very active, carting food back and fro to the nest. Was he just keeping a low profile? Sometimes they really can be elusive despite their size and colour.

Sadly, almost certainly, the answer is no, it really seems he is no more. On this day, the young fledged the nest - a single chick, a contrast to the three most previous years. And telling, the mother and young were ranging far, a normal behaviour, but if the male was about, he would surely be with them. A star bird he was, I fear he will not be replaced. With his passing, probably my Roller story has reached its end, the chances of a new male are slim. Somewhere up there in Roller Heaven, there is a bird that shaped a little more than your average bird does. Aside this sad news, so too did I lose a prized tree - one of three huge Silver Birches marking the southern extreme of my land. Mighty tree, now a forlorn hulk lying in the meadow, its base fractured by a passing gale! Ah well, a Black Kite didn't seem too fussed, the neighbouring tree still offering a rather nice vantage point. Other bird news on this day, the three White Stork chicks doing well, plodding the meadows at leisure, roosting up upon the nest, whilst two Lesser Spotted Eagles appeared overhead, two Cranes remained vocal in the fields and Nutcrackers became active around the feeders, though still not actually tempted by the rich offerings at the table. A minor detour on the way home, erm about 600 km (!), managed to swing by virtually every town in the country - from Moletai to Kaunas, from Marijampole to Merkinė and several more too! All to add a few Bee-eaters to the day's tally! Never a dull bird, these were a tad extra special - constituting the first breeding birds in the country, a small colony had been discovered a few days prior, favouring open meadows and bushland adjacent to the River Nemunas. Arrived and within minutes was watching the birds, three birds hawking from wires, then a massive willow. A few bubbling calls and off they shot, catching prey and vanishing towards the presumed nest localities. Fifteen minutes later, two were back, then four, much the same, hawking in the sunshine. Red-backed Shrikes below, a Marsh Marrier behind. Only the second time I have seen Bee-eater in Lithuania, coincidentally the last time was also a day I saw Roller - a juxtaposition of trends, one an expanding colonist, the other heading towards finality. Ups and downs. Ended the day with Black Woodpecker near the Ula River in the south-east of the country. 2-7 August. Lepipteran Highs. Bright sun, about 26 degrees, another perfect day to mop up on yet more butterflies. The season is now past its peak, but still plenty of kick - whilst the absolute number of species is beginning to decline from the giddy heights of mid-July, still I managed 32 species in an easy-going outing, plus the numbers of individual butterflies is most impressive, countless hundreds on the wing, including new emergences of many second generations. Did my favoured route through the tracks and byways of Ropejos Forest, stopping at classic localities to savour the spoils. Brimstones, Peacocks and Red Admirals galore, all fresh and new, plus the season's highest totals of Painted Ladies, at least 80 seen during the day. The day had started relatively poor, with few butterflies along the main track through Ropejos - just a few Silver-washed Fritillaries, a number of Scarce Coppers and a selection of all the regulars. On arriving at a favoured meadow, however, numbers were far more impressive - literally hundreds upon hundreds of butterflies, everything from

assorted whites and browns through to a variety of fritillaries, coppers and blues. Amongst the masses, at least ten Queen of Spain Fritillaries, a new generation of Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries, a lone White Admiral and the season's best numbers of Sooty Coppers to date. Up high, a Camberwell Beauty stubbornly stuck to the canopy, whilst further joy lower down included a Pallas's Fritillary, three Speckled Woods (a rare species locally) and a couple of Short-tailed Blues. However, the prize of the day went to a lone butterfly - after seeing a number of Essex & Large Skippers, I spied a rather special member of the family ...a stunning Silver-spotted Skipper, the first I have seen in Lithuania. Grabbed the camera and, typically, off he flitted, vanishing without trace, not to return! I spent a whole hour trying to relocate the little thing, all to no avail - the accompanying picture being of the ones I photographed in Britain a year earlier! Not all lost, however, that hour did result in my first Swallowtail for a couple of months and, more importantly, my first two Pale Clouded Yellows of the year. And then it was time to head home. Zooming along at 100 km/hr or so, I caught sight of a big dark butterfly settling aside the road. Hit the brakes and darted back, there taking salts, a splendid Camberwell Beauty, then another, and another! Three Camberwell Beauties, right approachable and right nice, super stuff, finally got some good photographs of this finicky species, one even having the grace to sit upon my finger! A few days later, a repeat attempt on the Silver-spotted Skipper seemed a good idea. Hmm, yes, that was a good way to spend three hours! Round and round the meadow for two brief views as the tiny butterflies flitted up, got caught by the breeze and zipped off to vanish into the medley of other butterflies! No hope of a photograph. Still, Pallas's Fritillaries appeared in good numbers, Queen of Spain Fritillaries were looking fantastic, and the Camberwell Beauty bonanza continued apace.

However, prize of the day was the zooming past of distinctively darker white butterfly. Off I went, charging in pursuit. A few hundred metres and it briefly landed, a male Bath White! A rare migrant to these parts, this was another new species for me, a grand way to reach the 'BIG 70' for the year. Up it went, hurtling off, mixing with the many Green-veined Whites, Wood Whites and Large Whites. Hmm, another species to elude the camera! Trundled off in its general direction ...even managed to find it again, or another, but the blighter seemed to delight in settling just long enough for me to approach, not long enough to photograph! Wandered round yet further, low and behold, another, this time a female And sweet, she decided to land for a few seconds. A few quick shots and up she went too, not landing again.

Two weeks left and the butterfly season is over, I've reached 70 species for the year, but still hopefully one more species to go... 8-14 August. Garden Bonus. Did next to nothing, saw very little and would have had very little to add! Under sunny skies, the Rollers had dispersed at Labanoras, Crested Tit and Willow Tit were visiting the feeders in my Vilnius garden. Nearby, Camberwell Beauties and Little Blues were still on the wing. Spent most of the days adding a third pond to my garden, much to the pleasure of my cat, a new drinking pool for her. Also to a visiting Southern Hawker dragonfly that gave it its immediate approval. However, into this domestic bliss, two little surprises, both from the pleasure of my kitchen step - the first, only the second ever in the garden, a Dunnock hopping around the new pool, a right deserving reward for the backache! And then, a mere 24 hours later, a passage Greenshank chipped its way over, the first ever from the garden and the 108th species from the doorstep or garden. And should that not be enough, a Turtle Dove also flew over, landing in the pines at the back ...species number 109! Full garden list here. 15-17 August. Raptor Fest. After weeks of pure butterflies, it was time to dust off the binoculars again for the start of a new birding season. With summer creeping towards its finality and birds on the move, a quick nose around the local fish pools seemed much in order, particularly to have a look at an unseasonal summer Smew found earlier in the day. What a pleasant day it turned out to be - kicked off with a White-tailed Eagle soaring overhead and a Wryneck feeding on a gravel track, then had a look at the Smew, a smart female tagging along with Goldeneye. With thoughts wandering back to butterflies, I was just pondering returning to my favoured meadows, when I happened to spy a falcon landing upon a nearby tower. Probably a Hobby, thought I, but checking with the binoculars, immediately it seemed not. Hmm, quite a mask there, it seemed, plus rather brownish. Went in closer, and there it was, a super Red-footed Falcon. Off it flew, directly south, over adjacent meadows and gone. With a fair inkling where it might end up, it did seem prudent to check it out. A half hour later and there it was again, hovering just overhead, plunging down to feed on bugs, then up onto posts to rest. A right corker, with a classy supporting act in the form of two Kestrels, another falcon none too common in eastern Lithuania. And next day, the raptor fest continued. Sat upon my raptor viewpoint on my land, with sausages sizzling on the latest viewpoint accessory, a built-in funnel barbecue, t'was an excellent spectacle all around - as well as two local Lesser Spotted Eagles, the skies were busy - an Osprey trying to drive off a White-tailed Eagle, a Montagu's Harrier quartering back and fro, a massive female Sparrowhawk hammering through. Also plenty of Common Buzzards, plus five Cranes stalking the meadows and the last White Storks still lingering - about six in the area, including the adults still on my house nest, their young now dispersed. However, prize of the day was not a bird, but a new visitor to my feeding station - for the first time ever, long awaited and most welcome, down scampering from a tree, rooting about under a peanut feeder, one right cute Red Squirrel. Certainly hope he will be back! Headed back for another view of the Red-footed Falcon on the 17th, still there he was, now sharing the patch with not only the two Kestrels, but an enormous immature White-tailed Eagle, two Lesser Spotted Eagles, one Sparrowhawk, three Marsh Harriers and four Common Buzzards. Keeping rather crowded in that meadow! Also five Turtle Doves on the track and an impressive movement of butterflies. With Red Admirals and Peacocks in high numbers and a steady flight of Painted Ladies, I began to look around. At a favoured patch, Queen of Spain Fritillaries were much in evidence, with several Weaver's Fritillaries too and last tatty Silver-washed and High Brown Fritillaries to accompany them. However, the butterfly of note on this day was Pale Clouded Yellow. A late summer migrant to Lithuania, the first individuals had begun appearing in the previous days, but the numbers out today were remarkable - hundreds across the fields, flitting about with the Small and Green-veined Whites to add a living shimmer to the day, most pleasant. 19-23 August. Bye Bye. News from my land, an sms from my mother staying in the house there. For the last time, the White Storks returned to the nest, bill clapping and settling to roost. Mid-morning, they

were gone, not to return, all storks in the area have departed, Africa-bound, another year finished! And with it, the first chills of the year, night temperatures taking an autumnal dip down to 6 C!!! Brrr, happy I'll be migrating to warmer climes too! Over the weekend of the 22nd and 23rd, much work to do at Labanoras - land maintenance, path clearance, tidying in preparation for autumn, not to mention the reinstallation of one mega-feeder to last out the next weeks as travels take me to foreign quarters. And as a fitting finale to the summer, a super Brown Hairstreak butterfly graced my woodland, the 71st species of the year. Birdwise, absolutely no White Storks left, but quite a buzz around the forest lake - not only the usual Goldeneyes and Mallards, but a cracking Kingfisher, the first for my land. Super stuff. And with that, off I go - five flights over the next two days, scooting me off to lands exotic, farewell for some weeks.